Cultural Leaders of India

RAMAYANA, MAHABHARATA AND BHAGAVATA WRITERS

Kamban ○ Pampa ○ Nannaya-Tikkana ○ Madhava Kandali Ekanath ○ Krittivasa ○ Sarala Dasa ○ Potana ○ Tunchattu Eluttacchan ○ Tulasi Das ○ Premananda ○ Bopadeva

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By the 14th-15th century when practically the whole of North India was under firm Muslim rule, Hindu Orissa was at the height of her political prosperity. Orissa's northern neighbour Bengal was already under Muslim rule for nearly two centuries and Hindu Orissa normally extended from the right bank of the Ganga up to the left bank of the Godavari, her southern boundaries advancing at times up to the banks of the Krishna. For three centuries, the valiant Oriyas kept the torch of independence gloriously burning, incessantly fighting out the aggressive wars of the Mussalmans from the North and of the Andhra and Tamil Hindu Kings in the South.

By that time, Orissa's world-famous temples at Konark, Puri and Bhubaneswar had also been completed, making it a veritable forest of magnificent monuments. Shivaji, while passing through Orissa, two centuries later, during his flight from Aurangzeb's Court, was believed to have said that "it was a land fit for gods".

But with all these signs and symbols of marvellous prosperity the Oriyas still lacked a literature of their own. It seems, the country had been pouring out all its tremendous mental as well as physical energy, right from the third century B.C. when it so bravely faced the full, terrific impact of an imperial army under young and ruthless Asoka Maurya, into great military ventures. During the few years of peace that it knew in-between the wars, it turned to massive creative ventures like the breath-taking monuments of Puri, Konark and Bhubaneswar. There was no need, it seems, for a literature, wars and worships taking up the country's entire thinking. It is no wonder, therefore, that the wondrous homes to Gods that the ancient Oriyas had dedicated,

are so full of scenes of war, of hunting and of marching armies, as well as those of amazingly romantic-realistic human love, both expressions being so natural to the mental climate of a virile race though now appearing incongruous to us in places of worship.

It was to such spacious times and such a flourishing political state that Sarala Dasa was born in the reign of the great King Kapilendra Deva (1435-1466) of the Solar dynasty of Orissa.

By that time, the Oriya language, as we know it today, was of course, already born, though still in infancy. The Bhubaneswar temple inscription of the 13th century was certainly in modern Oriya, in spite of its archaic tone and accent. Kapilendra Deva's own imperial commands (15th century) inscribed on the walls of the world-famous temple of Jagannatha, may also be said to be good modern Oriya.

But beyond these royal *fatwahs* inscribed on the temple-walls or on copper-plates granting gifts to Brahmins, the entire literature, in the Oriya language at that time probably consisted of no more than a few folk songs, describing the seasons or simple episodes in the life of Rama or Krishna.

Born to such an undeveloped literature, apparently incapable of any great intellectual venture and born too as a farmer to whom at that time, all education beyond mere three R's was a taboo, what Sarala Dasa, the peasant-genius, later on attempted and achieved, is nothing short of a miracle. Sanskrit was not only the proud language of the elite and of royalty, it was notorious also for its strict exclusiveness and its contemptuous attitude towards the regional language of the country. No wonder, therefore, that poor Sarala Dasa seldom begins a chapter in his *Mahabharata,* without profuse apologies for the unaccustomed thing he was doing and attributing all that venture to the dictations of the local goddess Sarala, keeping himself thoroughly in the background. And Dasa's *Mahabharata* continued to be, till recently,

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an object of utter contempt by the upper classes. But it was dear to the hearts of Orissa's unwashed millions for all these centuries.

The poet, however, in spite of what contempt and neglect he might have suffered in contemporary times, has been revered by the whole Oriya country as a *Sudra Muni* (a Sudra Saint) and his Samadhi at his native village, Jhankada in the district of Cuttack has been a well-known centre of pilgrimage. And like a happy divine retribution, it seems the genius and achievements of the peasant-poet have been treated in a scholarly manner and adequately propagated by Pandits of Orissa, such as Pandit Gopinath Nanda Sarma of Parlakemidi and Pandit Mrutyunjoy Ratha of Cuttack, particularly the former, who, with critical insight and boldness unusual for an English-ignorant Sanskrit Pandit, declared in unambiguous terms that the language of Sarala Dasa as found in his *Mahabharata,* uninfluenced by Sanskrit or any other language, was genuine and most respectable Oriya speech.

But 'Sarala Dasa' is the pen-name of the poet, meaning "the servitor of the goddess Sarala", the celebrated local deity. His real name was Siddheswara Parida, the pseudonym being an act of genuine dedication to the poet's real object of devotion. His youth appears to have been divided like that of any male member of his class between military exercises in the village *Akhada* and in all the agricultural operations in the ancestral fields; that class, the *Chasas* of Orissa, have been the main recruiting source of Orissa's historic Militia, known as *Paiks* (corruption of Sanskrit *Padatika*) till the British rulers deprived the entire class of their free-lands and demilitarised them after their patriotic rebellion of 1817 against the British rule. In Sarala's *Mahabharata* there are clearest signs of the young poet having had intensive practices in both agriculture and military exercises. Nothing, it seems, so delighted the poet's muse as battle scenes, his pictures of fights still remaining unrivalled in the whole of Oriya literature, for verve, climate and ferocity. And the poet remained

also essentially a peasant, that the dying Bhishma's entire sermon to the new king Yudhisthira on the basic principles of administration in Sarala's *Mahabharata* centres round the welfare of the peasantry only, that being, in the poet's opinion, the very foundation of any State; he makes Bhishma go even to such details as the length of the measuring rods to be used by the State officials in recording the peasants' acreage and also to the correct paddy measures to be used while settling the peasant's share of the harvest. Anticipating also by five centuries or so, all our post-independence measures for honouring and rewarding writers and artists the semi-literate peasant-poet of Orissa, makes Bhishma, India's superb model of elder statesmanship, speak these pregnant words to Yudhisthira. Says Bhishma,—

"And above all, Oh ! King,
Know and ever keep it in mind,
That talented people of all types
In your kingdom,
Are duly honoured,
And remember still more,
That you never appear niggardly
To poets of your kingdom in particular !"

In the entire ancient period of Oriya literature Sarala Dasa, of all poets and writers, has left a much more authentic picture of himself. Sarala Dasa was demonstratively proud of the soil he was born in, the state he belonged to and the goddess he worshipped. The village where he lived and died, the river where he took his daily bath, the places he must have visited as an infantryman as a member of the victorious armies of King Kapilendra Deva have all been baptised with waters of immortality through this great peasant's pen.

If Sarala Dasa could not learn Sanskrit being a Sudra, this very social disadvantage has been a great gain to the Oriya literature. Innocent of the Sanskrit original, Sarala's *Mahabharata,*

through the fervid imagination of that unsophisticated peasant-genius, has turned out to be a real national epic of the Oriya people, not only because the famous heroes and heroines of the Sanskrit original have been made into typical Oriya men and women, but because the whole epic has been thoroughly soaked with the average Oriya peasant's ways of looking at things, his superstitious beliefs and rituals, his dreams and his ideals that are to be found in rural Orissa even today. It is not surprising, therefore, that there are patches in Sarala's *Mahabharata* which are unspeakable vulgar from our modern, sophisticated west-oriented views, but men and women living close to the soil all the world over, are vulgar in many aspects of their daily life, without feeling it to be so. And if the *Mahabharata* of Sarala Dasa was a mere shadow of the original book or just a decent, respectable sort of thing, we wonder if it would have had the immense popularity it has for the last five centuries all over the Oriya-speaking world. Though Sarala's entire *Mahabharata* is written in Oriya, there are plenty of Sanskritised passages in it wherever called for by the mood of the topic, indicating the absorbing power of that great peasant.

Sarala Dasa displays natural sympathy for the lowly and the down-trodden. We have already spoken of his natural vision of politics or state-craft being mostly a peasant's affair. In the legend, which most probably has originated from him, about the emergence of Lord Jagannatha at Puri from the unburnt heart of the dead Krishna, his sympathy for the tribals, five centuries back, looks also unbelievable.

According to the legend, as recorded in Sarala's *Mahabharata* and soon universally taken for granted all over Orissa, Krishna's heart, when his mortal remains were cremated on the sea-beach at Dwaraka, refused to be burnt down, though blackened in the process. So, it was thrown on the waves of the sea. Penitent Jara, the *Savara* whose arrow had caused Krishna's painful death, followed, however, that floating remnant of Krishna's body. He followed it all along the sea-line of the entire subcontinent and

reached, at least, on the east-coast where now Puri stands. Formerly, a river was flowing into the sea there. During a flowtide the unburnt heart of Krishna floated down the estuary from the sea and Jara picked it up with reverence and settling down there, started worshipping it in his own way. Ages passed away in which that fossilised heart became the tribal deity of the *Savaras*. In the meantime, a king of Malwa, named Indradyumna, now being hypothetically identified with the famous king Rudradaman of Gujarat, in his desire to establish worship of Vishnu on earth, sent out emissaries to all parts of India to find out a genuine image of Vishnu. His eastern emissary, was a Brahmin, named Vidyapati. When he arrived at the *Savara* settlement at the place of the present Puri, young and handsome that he was, Vidyapati, was not only given a hearty welcome by the *Savara* Chief but was also offered the later's daughter in marriage, even though he declared that he was already married. Vidyapati accepted the *Savara* wife, who luckily turned out to be a loyal and devoted one. Vidyapati had heard rumours of a 'Blue Stone' deity being secretly worshipped by the *Savaras* in some jungle hide-out, even before he came to the settlement. He also had come to realise that the fearful *Savaras* would give their lives for protecting the secrecy of their tribal god. But now his apparent identification with the tribe through his marriage of the Chief's daughter became his advantage. Slowly he came to know where the deity was from his loving *Savara* wife, who agreed in a moment of romantic surrender, secretly to take her husband to the jungle hide-out. Vidyapati, with the help of his *Savara* wife, saw the deity, was satisfied in his own way after he heard of its origin and how it came to be there, that it was the genuine symbol of Vishnu. Then he pretended to go and get his first wife and her children from his country and return soon to settle there finally. The proposal being not unwelcome, Vidyapati was allowed to go back.

But Vidyapati, not long after, returned with his king Indradyumna followed by a royal army. Negotiations failing with the

Savaras for a peaceful surrender of their deity, their settlement was surrounded, Vidyapati leading the king straight to where the deity was. But to their horror, there was no deity. The king gave himself up to vigils and other austerities, for some enlightenment on the mystery. The deity appeared before the king in a dream to say that he had disappeared because the king had subjected his devotees, the *Savaras*, to humiliation, but now that He was satisfied with the king's austerities, He would be glad to accept his worship also and the king might find him next morning as a log of wood floating in the nearby estuary.

Next morning, a log of wood was seen floating in the estuary and the king Indradyumna hastened to pick it up. But to his surprise, the log was found to be too heavy for his personal efforts. He now called his entire retinue who tried but failed. Then the whole royal army was called in to try, with no better result.

The king again went into a prayerful vigil. The deity again appeared to him in a dream and said, "I do not yield to physical strength or kingly wealth. You have again ignored my devotees. I easily give myself up only to those who are devoted to me. Forbid any of your retinue or any of your strong men to touch me, but let Vidyapati, the Brahmin, on one side and the *Savara* Chief on the other, come and but touch me and I shall be yours easily".

And so it happened dramatically equating the Brahmin and the tribal before God.

Mahabharata is essentially a war-epic, as the other great epic is. But the young militia-man Siddheswara Parida must have felt outraged, in his inborn poetic sensitivity, at the brutalities of war, which he must have witnessed again and again, as a conscript during the military campaigns of his king, Kapilendra Deva. And longing for peace in his heart of hearts, the poet has left a wonderful picture of a peaceful utopia of his dreams in his epic.

For the *Rajasuya* ceremony of Yudhisthira, the other Pandava-brothers spread out in all directions, for conquest and the acceptance of sole sovereignty of the Pandavas by chiefs all over the country.

One Pandava, however, confronted a strange state and community on the west coast of India, round about present Saurastra. That state was created, like the Netherlands of Europe, by dyking the sea and the leading engineer of the project was now the king of the reclaimed land. And the community he had invited to settle there was organised by him strictly on principles of non-violence and mutual co-operation. Everybody worked for his living, not excluding the king himself, who not only had no palace of his own, but begged his daily food from his own people. The little community had no quarrel with its neighbours, as among themselves. When the Pandava army confronted this unique state, the king met the General and putting him to a moral shame, described the non-violent, peaceful conditions of his state and people and gently asked him to leave them alone ! Hasn't this peasant-genius of Orissa of the 15th century anticipated in this unique little dream, Tolstoy and Gandhi and Vinoba, by many centuries ?

Sarala Dasa, genius that he was, must not have liked many other things also like wars, that were happening in his contemporary society and administration. His sensitive heart must have silently revolted against many a case of injustice and iniquity which are but parts of human existence all over the world and do happen at all times. But symbolising the totality of all iniquity in society in an act of expropriation by the king, in the fair name of justice, Sarala Dasa has left a tell-tale record of his own evaluation of men and matters of his times. His story of a gold bangle, not found in the original, is as follows—

A Brahmin free-holder had engaged a labourer to level down a portion of his backyard garden. While digging, the labourer came across a pair of gem-studded gold bangles. And he

forthwith brought the precious finds to the master, asking him to take them. But the noble-hearted master of that golden age, refused to take them and offered them instead to the labourer saying that he (the master) was entitled only to the produces on the surface of the soil, not of what was found inside and whatever he (the labourer) got out of his own labour was his (the labourer's). The labourer on the other hand pleaded that he was entitled to nothing beyond his daily wages and that the bangles which must have been in the possession of the Brahmin master's ancestors, were, by all laws of equity his (the Brahmin's).

And so the dispute went on. For a settlement the master and servant both left for the court of the just king Yudhisthira. The old king heard the dispute but looked up to his wise brother Sahadeva for a solution.

Said Sahadeva, "It is all due to the spirit of the times, the effect of your presence and regime. Your Majesty's regime is long over. The *Dwapara* era is gone and that of *Kali* (The era of Disputes and Disruptions) has long descended on earth. It was at Krishna's word that I am keeping it in restraint till your Majesty departed from the Earth".

Old king Yudhisthira became curious. He ordered *Kali* to be released. And lo and behold, the dispute between the same Brahmin master and his servant immediately caught on an absolutely new but most unpleasant colour. The master now demanded the bangles as his, refusing any concession to the labourer who, he said, was entitled only to his wages and the labourer rebutted by saying that the master being entitled only to what was on the surface of his land, he was entitled to whatever he got in the course of his labours.

Good king Yudhisthira, preparing for his Heavenward journey, left the dispute to be decided later on by Parikshit, his successor.

And when Parikshit, the *Kali* King, in constrast to the spirit of the times of his grand-father, heard the dispute, he made short

shrift of the whole matter and straight-away declared the bangles to be State property, asked the Treasurer to store them away in the State Treasury, which was a typical act of injustice, perhaps, daily witnessed by the poet in the contemporary administration and which he did not hesitate to satirize here under the camouflage of a story.

Supreme genius that he was, Sarala Dasa, appears to have been a man of deep genuine humility. He could never forget that he belonged to the lower ranks of a hierarchical society. But all the same, the inherent creative urge in the semi-literate peasant could not be suppressed. And so, although placed in the most inhibiting of circumstances, this noble peasant, was able to work a real linguistic and literary miracle, in not only producing an enormous epic but keeping it also wonderfully coherent and sustained in his own way, yet so different from the original, in a language that did not have at that time anything more than a few primitive songs. And the great man attributes all that miracle, without the slightest reservation, to his goddess, Sarala, the local deity, repeatedly giving himself out as no more than an illiterate and ignorant man, writing only what the Mother dictated to him in his dreams,—exactly as the great illiterate Ramakrishna Paramahamsa used to say four centuries later, while throwing out unconsciously, precious pearls of wisdom.

But it was the work of this unostentatious, unpretentious and almost unlettered peasant that has really laid the firm foundation for the Oriya literature. The peasant-poet's literary marvel proved, beyond any doubt, that the common man's speech in Orissa was capable of great achievements like those in Sanskrit. Thereafter, it was easy for others to walk the road which daring Sarala Dasa opened for all. And so a whole national literature was possible in Orissa because of one single book, the Oriya *Mahabharata* of semi-literate peasant-poet Sarala Dasa of the 15th century.